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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

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HQ USAF FOR XXXX
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
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CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

[1](#)1. Mideast

[1](#)2. Islam and Democracy

Key stories in the media:

Leading media reported that Defense Minister Ehud Barak told the

Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Monday that one of Israel's goals in the Gaza Strip is to bring down Hamas. Laying out the general strategy, Barak said that the first priority is to contain the Qassam rockets and the smuggling of arms and explosives from the Sinai, followed then by destabilizing Hamas's grip on the territory. All media quoted IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi as saying on Monday that the "IDF is prepared and ready to deepen and broaden its activities in the Gaza Strip, in any way necessary, and in line with the [political] decisions that will be made." Ha'aretz noted that sources at the Defense Ministry have said that the army's preparations are not yet complete and may take several more months. Leading media reported that on Monday an assassination attempt by the IDF in Gaza failed.

All media reported that Shas is threatening to pull out of the governing coalition following reports that Palestinian and Israeli negotiating teams have been secretly discussing the future of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Post said that a story it printed on Sunday is the basis for Shas's threat. Maariv reported that senior Shas members attacked FM Tzipi Livni, quoting one of them as saying that she "is stirring things up for Olmert and pushing Shas out of the government."

Ha'aretz quoted Jerusalem city manager Yair Ma'ayan as saying that the government is holding up construction of hundreds of apartments in Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, including in Pisgat Ze'ev and Har Homa. However, Ha'aretz reported that Ma'ayan told the Knesset's Economics Committee on Monday that the municipality is still moving forward with plans to build 10,000 apartments in East Jerusalem, including some in these same neighborhoods.

All media reported that on Monday around 200 people from Sderot blocked streets in central Tel Aviv to protest the government's inability to stop Qassam rocket tikes on their city. In Jerusalem, hundreds of protesters gathered at a protest tent erected by Sderot residents. Ha'aretz commented that the demonstration leaders are politically slanted (to the Right) but that the despair is real.

Israel Radio quoted Palestinian PM Salam Fayyad as saying in a lecture in Washington that Israel is not living up to its Roadmap commitments.

Major media quoted a Justice Ministry official as saying on Monday that the Registrar of Nonprofit Organizations has decided to withdraw the certificate of proper administration from the organization that provides funding for Peace Now.

Ha'aretz reported that the police arrested five Palestinian residents of the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan this week after they petitioned the High Court of Justice to stop an Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) excavation under their homes. According to the IAA, the dig has uncovered the remains of a Second Temple-era drainage channel. It is being financed by Elad, an organization that promotes the Judaization of East Jerusalem.

Ha'aretz reported that last night PM Ehud Olmert met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel to discuss, among other Middle East issues, tougher sanctions against Iran. Ha'aretz quoted a senior GOI source as saying Olmert planned to show Merkel intelligence information on the Iranian nuclear program. The two leaders also planned to discuss German mediation efforts for the release of the two Israeli soldiers abducted by Hizbullah, as well as efforts to broker a deal for the release of Gilad Shalit. The Jerusalem Post reported that a senior Hamas official in Gaza warned on Monday that Israel can forget about Shalit if it goes ahead with its threats to assassinate the political leaders of Hamas. The leading Internet news site Ynet quoted Merkel as saying during her meeting with Olmert that the situation along the Gaza border has only one solutions and that is for Hamas to stop the Qassam attacks. Should the fire persist, Merkel was quoted as saying, Israel has every right to defend itself.

The Jerusalem Post reported that during his two-day visit to Ankara that starts today, Defense Minister Barak plans to sell Turkey the Arrow missile defense system and the Ofek spy satellite.

Israel Radio reported that some Jewish and Palestinian residents of Hebron have complained about last week's meeting between Palestinian

and settler leaders in the city. The radio reported that radical right-wing militant Baruch Marzel was among the Jewish dissenters, and that the PA summoned Sheikh Abu-Hader Jabri for clarifications.

The Jerusalem Post cited Al Jazeera-TV as saying that a proposal by Israeli Ambassador to Cairo that Hebrew be added to the list of foreign languages in the Egyptian curriculum was met with anger and demands to remove Hebrew studies from the university curriculum.

The Jerusalem Post and other media reported that a settler group -- the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel -- has demanded that Education Minister Prof. Yuli Tamir revoke the Israel Prize awarded last week to Prof. Zeev Sternhell. The group cited Sternhell's long-time antagonism toward settlers, and claimed that he "justified their murder at the hands of Arab terrorists, and essentially called for civil war."

The Jerusalem Post and other media reported that Fitch, one of the three leading international credit-rating agencies, has upped its ratings on Israel for the first time in 15 years, on the back of the country's rapidly falling public debt and "revitalized growth."

All media reported that Rep. Tom Lantos, the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the only Holocaust to serve in Congress, died on Monday aged 80. The media recalled his close affinity with Israel.

The Jerusalem Post reported that on Wednesday in Washington, the American friends of the Yitzhak Rabin Center (at Tel Aviv University) will pay tribute to Jimmy Hoffa at a gala dinner that will feature guest speakers Dalia and Yuval Rabin, as well as former President Bill Clinton. The newspaper wrote that Hoffa demonstrated his willingness to help the Jewish community in Palestine's hour of need.

11. Mideast:

Summary:

Senior columnist and longtime dove Yoel Marcus wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "[Ehud Olmert] needs to make a serious effort to ... move toward a peace agreement with the Palestinians while U.S. President George W. Bush is still in power.... Olmert may have risen to power with a message of peace, but Gaza could be his downfall."

Military correspondent Amir Rappaport wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv: "Statements [recently] made by [cabinet ministers] ... attest to the fact that not much was learned from the painful lessons of the Second Lebanon War."

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in Ha'aretz: "Israel has turned into a vital plaything [in] the intra-Palestinian struggle."

Ahmed Yousef, senior political advisor to Palestinian (Hamas) Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, wrote in Ha'aretz: "If our people can see no genuine and realistic political or economic horizon and their attempts to establish a genuine truce are consistently rejected, it is inevitable that they will turn to resistance as the only outlet for their anger and frustration."

Block Quotes:

11. "Gaza Could Be His Downfall"

Senior columnist and longtime dove Yoel Marcus wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (2/12): "Quite a few voices nowadays are clamoring for the army to go [into Gaza] and fix [the terrorists'] hides.... Israel cannot go into Gaza today unless it knows how to get out, when to get out, what it plans to achieve, and how many soldiers it may cost us. After one bloody trap in Lebanon, Israel must beware of a sequel.... After the Lebanon fiasco and the problems in Gaza, there is only one way for Ehud Olmert to get the

country out of the mess he's dragged us into. He needs to make a serious effort to get back on the Annapolis track and move toward a peace agreement with the Palestinians while U.S. President George W. Bush is still in power. Mahmoud Abbas is weak? So strengthen him with a multi-national force in Gaza, before Hamas gets its claws on the West Bank, masterminding terror attacks and grabbing the reins of the Palestinian Authority. Olmert may have risen to power with a message of peace, but Gaza could be his downfall."

II. "We Haven't Learned Anything"

Military correspondent Amir Rappaport wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv (2/12): "The events of the past number of days -- the terror attack in Dimona, the injury of the brothers from Sderot and the fact that Israel has come to be perceived by the Arab world and its own residents as helpless in the face of the Qassam rocket fire -- have clearly demonstrated that not only do the IDF and the despairing residents of Sderot yearn for a leader who might radiate authority and set a path, but the government in its entirety. Statements [recently] made by [cabinet ministers] ... attest to the fact that not much was learned from the painful lessons of the Second Lebanon War. Even worse, many security establishment officials say they feel that the Winograd Commission report has served to paralyze the political echelon and to prevent any possibility of dealing in an organized way with the current threat facing Israel. And so, instead of a policy that defines what goals Israel would like to achieve versus Hamas in the Gaza Strip, ideas are tossed into the air at a dizzying pace but without any clear purpose. And so, without any clear path, the list of means to achieve any sort of military or political goal with respect to the Gaza Strip does not look promising."

III. "Hamas Sets Its Crosshairs on Ramallah and Cairo"

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in Ha'aretz (2/12): "Hamas's battle against Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, and in the face of Arab pressure, including from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, is guiding its Qassam fire and tactics no less than its desire to hit Israel. Since Hamas understands that Qassam rockets will not bring down Israel, Hamas will pursue its objectives in Ramallah and Cairo.... Israel has turned into a vital plaything [in] the intra-Palestinian struggle.... On the diplomatic level, Hamas assesses that to the Arab public, the fighting with Israel, even if it becomes bloody, will turn the organization into the true fighter against the occupation; first and foremost, it will preclude [Mahmoud] Abbas's diplomatic negotiations with Israel when the latter crushes neighborhoods in Gaza. Even Hamas's detractors within Fatah will find it difficult at such a time to express themselves against Hamas -- this would be deemed support for Israel. Hamas believes that a military confrontation threatens Abbas no less than it would harm Hamas and the Gazans. A possible refuge would be a Fatah-Hamas dialogue that Abbas is not yet ready for, but Hamas is not against it, at least on its own terms."

IV. "Palestinian Revenge Was Inevitable"

Ahmed Yousef, senior political advisor to Palestinian (Hamas) Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, wrote in Ha'aretz (2/12): "Last week's bombing in Dimona was the first martyrdom operation committed by Hamas in more than five years.... In the last two months, more than a hundred people have been killed by the Israeli occupation forces in the Gaza Strip, including many civilians, women and children. Thirty people have died in the last month for lack of medical care brought on by the embargo.... The cold-blooded fact is that the ratio of Palestinian deaths to Israelis is now over 40 to 1. The Hamas-led government has consistently called for a long-term cease-fire.... If the people of Sderot want to know why rockets continue to land around them, they should ask their own government why it has continually rejected our calls for a cease-fire and continued its policy of daily incursions and reckless targeting that put the whole population at risk.... If our people can see no genuine and realistic political or economic horizon and their attempts to establish a genuine truce are consistently rejected, it is inevitable that they will turn to resistance as the only outlet for their anger and frustration.... Given the facts on the ground and the total mistrust that now prevails on all sides, we believe neither Israelis nor Palestinians are ready for final-status negotiations."

12. Islam and Democracy:

Summary:

Former foreign minister Prof. Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote in the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "The question that must be asked is whether the Muslims are prepared to accept the fact that Islam is a religion and not a state."

Block Quotes:

"Possible Reconciliation?"

Former foreign minister Prof. Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote in the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (2/12): "The question that must be asked is whether the Muslims are prepared to accept the fact the fact that Islam is a religion and not a state, and that just like in the Christian world, there is the Emperor's domain -- and God's. An enlightenment in the Muslim states should be pushed by the fact that during the entire history theocracy has not served to promote humanity.... It is always possible to claim ... that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the mainstay of the problem and that resolving the distress of the Palestinians will greatly contribute to the improvement of relations between Muslim society and the West.... However, Muslim Arabs should not delude themselves into thinking that this conflict is the main reason for their slow progress. The end of the American occupation in Iraq and an Israeli-Arab peace agreement will have a tremendous influence, but they are no miracle cures. The battle to eradicate distress, analphabetism, and corruption, as well as a rapprochement between Islam and the age of science, do not have to wait for the outcome of the Annapolis process."

JONES